

GLOBAL EDUCATION FOR THE 1980s

for interest
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I am always delighted and at the same time intimidated when I am invited to speak in Manitoba. Delighted because here is a province with some of the most energetically creative people in the country. Good talkers, you are good doers too; and the distance between the first talent and the second is always short. To be in your company is to be among the elect of the Gods.

The mention of the word "Gods" tells why I am also intimidated. Twelve years ago when I first came to Canada I set about to discover what the name of the different provinces meant. I was told that Manitoba means "the God that speaks" this is the only province with claims to divinity - a divinity that specializes in communication. It ^{seem} to me then, and it seems to me now, nothing short of impudence to attempt to make a speech in a province where the Godhead is the spoken word.

But it is the nature of people nurtured in the Caribbean to take risks. And calculated impertinence comes easily to me. So at the risk of being accused of entering the God's shrine and stealing her sacred fire I decided to accept your invitation and brave whatever thunderbolts the divine wrath may throw in my direction.

But there is method in my impudence. When we think of Gods communicating we think inevitably in the language of symbols and imagery. It would seem that divinities have a well-bred distaste for abstract statements. Intimates of the human psyche, they know that we interpret the world around us - what we call reality - by way of symbols. We only turn into abstractions what we first mint as imagery. And it is fundamentally about symbols and their important - if often unacknowledged - place in our educational process that I wish to talk with you today.

I want to begin with a drama that rivetted our attention here in Canada early this year. You must have watched as I did, with mounting fascination, the unfolding of the last days of President Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. In its escalating tension, in the vivid confrontation of its leading characters - one like David and the other like Goliath - in its massive human scale and the minute-by-minute shifts of balance, it was far better television than Dallas, Dynasty or any of the other products of Soap-ville can hope to be.

As we watched it we became aware of the fact that here was history not just being recorded by the television but in a sense being made by it.

The eyes of the camera focussed on the gross irregularities of President Marcos' much trumpeted "free elections" showing the extent to which votes cast ended up not being counted but flushed down toilets. It was again the camera's eye that provoked the American public to mount greater and greater pressure on Washington to distance itself from Marcos and all his works.

In the hands of a good teacher that aspect of the revolution can yield rich dividends, for he or she can show that the television camera is one of the most telling symbols of that condition of interconnectedness of the peoples of the world which we call by the short hand of "global village". The Philippine's Revolution, for all its physical distance from our living rooms here in Canada could have been taking place on our front lawns, and because the events were so pictorally close they became part of the political life of Americans with effects clearly felt in Washington. This is just one example of the interpenetration that is now a feature of our lives.

Another dividend that the Philippine Revolution could yield any classroom is the observation of its largely non-violent nature. Nothing was more dramatically compelling than to watch rows and rows of vulnerable human bodies barring the advance of the tanks sent out to crush their resistance and to assert the immovability of a government that for years had ran rough-shod over its people. It was the tanks, not the people that gave way;

signifying the triumph of unarmed humanity over those conspicuously lethal instruments of dictatorial paranoia. Non violence ^{has} made its point - the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King was alive and well. The supremacy of human kind over technology, whatever its forms, was dramatically demonstrated.

There was historical symbolism also in the presence of Mrs. Aquino, far reaching for the status of women around the world. A housewife until her husband was assassinated, she turned revolutionary leader inspiring large masses of people trained in non-violence to bring aⁿ end to a corrupt regime. Constantly referring to herself "a little woman" she meant by that assertion that there are no little people, only people do not know how big they are. In short, there is tremendous unexpressed potential in those (particularly women) who are not considered the makers of history but its passive victims.

All this talk about the Philippines is not merely because of the recent events there. The Philippines stand in the middle of what is now known as the Pacific Rim, and that immense, geo-political region is pulsating with huge populations, ceaseless commercial activity, talents, skills and political experiments - all of which are making it the centre of gravity of our world. In short, the Atlantic world is giving up the supremacy it enjoyed over the last five centuries. We are in the middle of a fundamental shift in the axis of history. The heyday of Atlantic supremacy was also the heyday of empires, of human domination, and of the corresponding revolts against it. The shift to the Pacific represents something quite different. For two of the nations most prominent in that area, Japan and China, were prostrate forty years ago. One of them was a defeated militarist country; and the other was a country bled white by both its internal and external predators.

Both of them have brought themselves ^{to} tremendous potency, not by arms but by ideas. Japan has been hospitable to ideas ever since she capitulated to nuclear explosions. China, having made herself mistress of her own house, has now opened her doors to those who can bring with them intellectual, managerial or technological instruments of growth.

What we are witnessing at the present in the Pacific region is a ferment of the human spirit. And the fact that Japan has become the world's economic superpower, putting behind it even the United States and leaving the Soviet Union lagging behind Brazil, should say something to us: the pace of history is now being set not by those who concentrate on the resources of annihilation but by those who concentrate on the powers of innovation.

All of this greatly concerns Canada - itself happily a country that is both Atlantic and Pacific. My favorite description of this country ~~goes~~ runs thus: "Canada is bounded on the North by mystery; on the South by importunity; on the East by history and on the West by the East". With such credentials she can hardly escape having an internationalist perspective. When you add to that the fact that thirty cents in every Canadian dollar comes from trade and that we are constantly in search of markets to make that figure even higher, then the Pacific region, the rest of Asia, Latin American and Africa are of vital importance to us. On top of that Canada is set delicately between the two superpowers, a vulnerable position that requires not just military alertness but ideas that will help to diffuse the tension and keep the superpowers from nuclear collision.

Canada is rich in natural resources but its greatest and most enduring resource is the quality of its citizens' minds. Never forget that the Swiss watch industry came out of the Swiss mind. There is nothing in the Alps to suggest the ticking of a time-piece.

Minds of quality and resourcefulness are certainly going to be needed not only in Canada but everywhere else to cope with a fundamental fact which may sometimes escape the attention of our educators. We are living at the end of ^a era. The Chinese have a famous curse: "may you live in interesting times". We are certainly doing that in the middle of the 1980's and the turbulence of our times suggests the need for thoughtful and imaginative reconstruction of the institutions we have hitherto thrown up, as well as the creation of new ones to deal with the increasing interpenetration of the peoples of our global village.

What are the signals that tell us that we are the end of an era? There are four fundamental ones: first the nuclear crisis, second the economic, third the crisis in the ecology and fourth the demographic crisis. The effects of none of these crises can be localised. They all have threatening global implications and their convergence - that is to say, the fact that they are all happening at the same time - tells us that the philosophical assumptions on which we have based our life and the life of our civilization for the last forty years are no longer adequate to meet this horrendous confluence.

Briefly expressed, the crises amount to this: we have enough nuclear power to render our planet either a burning waste or reduce it to a nuclear winter in which life will slowly be destroyed either by intention or by accident. Our international economy is so fragile that many countries have to fight against the impulse to be protectionist in themselves and in their neighbours; and the collective debt of Third World Countries has already surpassed the seven hundred billion dollars figure. Nature is issuing clear signs of collapse and disfigurement, as deserts advance swallowing up agricultural land in not just one but four continents; as acid rain wreaks its havoc on land and buildings alike. And the world's population threatens to increase to the staggering figure of 7 billion by the year 2000 if the present rates continue. The carrying capacity of our planet will collapse if that trend continues.

A convergence of such staggering crises has never before occurred in the history of human experience. They make us all vulnerable wherever we are and whatever culture we live within and the motto "business as usual" is totally inadequate to cope with such an emergency.

In view of all this, global education is no longer a luxury but an imperative necessity. The question is no longer whether we can afford global education but whether we can afford to do without it. But it is not so much a subject added to the already impressive array of subjects as a philosophical attitude, that should come through the way each subject is taught or. To put it in the vocabulary of the times: it is a perspective that creates and sustains the teaching procedures in the classroom.

The underpinnings of global education are threefold:

1. To make our young people aware of the historically unprecedented situation in which we find ourselves - what I refer to earlier as the convergence of crises.
2. To create attitudes by which these crises are judged as soluble and not beyond our capabilities.
3. To assist the youth in creating values that take them beyond the crises to the construction and maintenance of a different kind of international order.
4. To help them find the symbols that give vivid expression to those values.

In short, the aim of global education is not merely to make our young people understand the world as it is but also to empower them to seek for safer and sounder alternatives to the present mess.

But in order to do that we must first clear away some of the symbolic lumber that we have been carrying around in our psyches and transmitting into our classrooms. The first piece of symbolic lumber that we must jettison is our Manichean picture of the world. By Manichean I mean the view that our world is a battlefield occupied by two contending deities, one of them of light and the other of darkness. The visible and physical expressions of these two contending deities are, of course, the Soviet Union and the United States and, depending on your point of view, one of them is an angel of enlightenment and the other a merchant of darkness. If such a symbol is at the bottom of our thinking it is bound to seep into our teaching with the result that we constantly think of warfare either cold or hot, of nuclear and non-nuclear arsenals and of a nerve-wracking minuet on the fringes of apocalypse. With such a theological symbol it matters not eventually whether human kind is destroyed or reduced to the diseased conditions of a nuclear winter - provided that the right deity prevails.

There is already evidence that such symbolism and the convictions which go with it have the effect of making numbers of young people feel that there is nothing that they can do to change the course of events and that a pleasure-frenzied fatalism is the only course to adopt. If we come to believe in the inevitability of nuclear confrontation, by the same token we also come to believe in the impotence of human initiative to prevent it.

On the other hand if we use the symbol of spaceship Earth as seen by the astronauts - small, compact and totally interconnected, then what comes through in our teaching is the necessity, even the inevitability, of compromise, negotiation, mutual accommodation. In short, we give pride of place to the study of the dynamics of peace rather than those of warfare. If we assert the primacy of human kind over the instruments that it has created i.e. technology; and if we teach that technology is a good servant but a bad master then our young people will not live their lives with the conviction that impersonal machines bearing armageddon are in charge of their destiny. Remember, too, that when we talk about the survival of the fittest in evolutionary terms and classify human kind as the fittest, we are really saying that the human species triumphed over immensely difficult circumstances, both animal and environmental in the long fore-history of evolution, because they developed a capability to cooperate in the interest of their collective survival.

Canada itself can be used as a symbol of the art of negotiation and compromise. This querulous comity of a country, which an American has recently called "a desperate enterprise" (implying by that phrase that it flies in the face of geographical forces) holds together by active, continuous dialogue, negotiation, accommodation and compromise. If we can teach our young people the processes by which we keep this delicate, knife-edged confederation intact then we are really educating them for what our global village requires at this moment.

The second piece of symbolic lumber that we have to jettison at the moment is the image of the pyramid. That smooth image taken from geometry portraying the world as having a broad base on which the weight of the structure falls

crushingly from a narrow top of control has worked havoc with our conception of the international order. As a conception of the international order, it is already out of date, for our world is moving from a bi-polar to a multi-polar one and the two superpowers can no longer dictate their will over a number of countries like China, India, Iran, Brazil. It does not take much thought to realize that the image of the pyramid is at the bottom of the system of apartheid now being rapidly unravelled in what may yet become another Lebanon at the tip of Southern Africa.

One of the most enduring symbols of the revolt against the pyramid lies at the back of a lot of our literature and the religious traditions we have inherited in the West: the exodus of the Jews under Moses from the Egypt of the Pharaoh. In Pharaoh's Egypt the pyramid was not only the symbol of the way society was structured but of an ornate and ponderous preoccupation with death. The image of the pyramid was what was overturned in the recent Philippines revolution and the changes in what I described earlier as the "Pacific Rim" are indicating how inadequate a conception of the world this image is. Besides the pyramidal symbol is a visual version of the Manichean one.

In its place we could use as a basis of our thinking the image of the lattice work in which everything is connected with everything else, not on a top-down basis, but right across the board in relations of approximate equality. For what we want our young people to recognize is that the phrase 'global village' implies a mutual vulnerability of all the peoples of the Earth. In short our planet Earth is like a drum: strike it in one place and it reverberates everywhere.

There are two other symbols whose retention has cost us dearly and wreaked immense havoc; the first is the symbol of the natural order as an inexhaustible gold mine; the second is that of a natural order as garbage dump. The assumption that we can continually extract from nature without putting back which is at the bottom of so much of our consumer ethic is one

that is rapidly eroding the carrying capacity of the Earth. Nature is an organism not a machine but we have imposed upon our understanding of her mechanical images and consequently treated her as if she is indestructible.

Acid rain, declining water tables, advancing deserts, soil erosion and disconcerting changes in climatic conditions are all demonstrating how mistaken are the images by which we have interpreted her operations. Treating her as a garbage dump, we are in danger of so polluting her restorative powers that they will no longer be operative and the biologists tell us that we are capable of altering the biosphere to the point where it will no longer be capable of sustaining our own forms of life. If we treat nature as a organism and a very fragile one, the symbol that richly expresses this healthy attitude is the Ukrainian Easter Egg. Fragile but powerful, beautiful in its original state and made even more so by the careful attention of human ingenuity the Ukrainian Egg stands for nature's power of recuperation, resurrection - the constant giving forth of new life. Provided, that is, that it is treated with sensitivity, respect and very careful handling. Nature has "rights" as much as we do.

My final example of the sort of symbol that we could do without is again a mechanical one. The hydro-electric dam constructed to store water and make it available when necessary has given us what is referred to in development literature as the "trickle down theory of wealth". It is the theory that maintains that if you make the people at the top rich, money will flow to the bottom by an inevitable law of financial gravitation. The experience of the last thirty years in the Third World has demonstrated the very opposite: that money made at the top stays at the top; that little or no trickle occurs and that the rich can become richer and the poor can become poorer unless there is some other force at work operating to make the distribution of wealth possible and even necessary. The old motto of 'seek ye first the comfort of the elite and all other things will be added to the rest' has turned out to be the worst possible advice we could have adopted. In a deeper sense it was a variant of the symbol of the pyramid. Again we have learned that it is wiser to work from the bottom concentrating on bringing

out the talents, the initiative and the latent power of little people (as Mrs. Aquino symbolized in the Philippines) to prevent the development of societies from being skewed in a way that leaves millions of people hopeless and hapless and bordering on fatalism and apathy - or senseless violence. Never forget Pierre Trudeau's celebrated misquotation of a well known saying: "Lack of power corrupts and an absolute lack of power corrupts absolutely".

One of the most potent symbols we can use, a symbol that is the very opposite of those that have just referred to is that of the tree. Assemble the right conditions at the base and the tree will take root and shoot up from the earth. It will then take in carbon dioxide and give out oxygen, besides conferring upon the landscape around it the blessings of filtered water and the protection of the soil. The symbol of the tree reminds us that nature is an organism and as an organism needs nurture and care. Cut down trees in the higher slopes of countries and the soil erodes, rivers swell with unfiltered water; flood and inundations follow. Cut down trees for commercial purposes in the Amazon forests and we destroy forever myriads of species of herbs and plants, not yet catalogued, whose medicinal qualities will be forever lost to human kind. Cut down trees and vegetation in Africa and the advancing desert is the only beneficiary.

Not surprisingly the tree is a symbol of life and wisdom in Indian mythology and the early chapters of the book of Genesis are full of trees and their relationships to the health, physical and spiritual of the human race. And when we talk about assembling the right conditions at the base so that the tree will take root and grow we are also using a symbol for the development of initiative, self-reliance in poor communities: in short the empowerment of the poor to take a greater control over their lives and their destinies.

The symbol of the tree cuts across numerous disciplines: literature, folklore, religion, social studies, history. The physical fact of the tree cuts across the sciences. The tree is a treasury for teachers especially in Canada where it plays such an important part in the physical and mental landscape and in our history.

Somewhere in his writings, Northrop Frye made this astounding statement 'a change of imagery is often more important than a change in doctrine'. He of all Canadian scholars has most cogently and eloquently pointed out to us how much of our thinking starts in symbols and images. I have been trying to demonstrate how much of our education processes are based, sometimes half consciously sometimes with total consciousness on certain kinds of symbols. As the symbol goes so goes the creative or inhibitive powers of human kind. It is fundamental to our survival therefore, as an interconnected, mutually vulnerable set of peoples in this global village that we adopt as the basis, not only of our education systems but of all our thinking, symbols that release the powers of the human imagination to survive the convergence of crises which the 1980s have revealed and to set about creating a new historical era in which we can live more sensibly, more peacefully and with less social distortions and inequities on this increasingly diminishing planet than we are doing at the moment. When the Gods speak to us about our capabilities they do so in symbols. In Manitoba that should not be hard to remember.